Pay to Pave: A Fair Way to Cleaner Water

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"The more you pave, the more you pay."

That slogan is the calling card of local officials who want to protect their communities from the consequences of unmanaged stormwater through a logical, equitable and affordable way to achieve the goals of flood protection and healthy waterways statewide.

We all remember too well the property damage resulting from the spring 2010 floods, and the more frequent flooding problems caused by smaller storms. Stormwater runoff is also one of the prime polluters of the state's rivers, lakes and streams, and of Rhode Island's No. 1 economic resource, Narragansett Bay. But unlike wastewater and combined sewage overflow that share the top polluter berth, in most communities there has never been dedicated funding to manage stormwater's overall impact on the water we drink, and in which we swim and fish.

Most people understand why and at what level they should rightly pay for utilities such as the water that comes into our homes and out of our faucets that we use to drink, cook and bathe. Likewise, the wastewater that leaves our homes, which needs to be treated and cleaned before it is pumped back into the environment. You get your water bill, and you pay your share for what you have used each month. You get your sewer bill, and you pay for how much you have circulated to your local wastewater treatment plant.

Currently, there is no user fee attached to stormwater, which is created when it rains and washes the oil, gas and grease films off our roads, collecting with it pet waste and litter, and then flows into our waterways and aquifers with no treatment whatsoever. We ignore that process, or somehow believe it is the sparkling, pristine precipitation that Gene Kelly danced through while "Singin' in the Rain!"

In reality, however, things aren't right as rain. Any paved area or expanse of impervious surface, be it roads, highways or the roofs of houses and local businesses, that repels what falls from the sky during storms, is the starting point for a flow of polluted runoff. It sluices into storm drains, where it is channeled to the waters along the nearby riverbank or beach where local residents live and play.

Sometimes storm drains don't work the way they are supposed to — they get clogged from sediment build-up, collapse because they are old and need of replacing or are undersized for the volume of runoff coming off newly developed areas. The annoyances of having to drive through a flooded street quickly become public health and safety concerns and possible litigation material, when car accidents occur or emergency response vehicles are detoured.

Local communities have begun to deal with runoff using techniques such as basins to store flood flows, capturing litter and sediment-bound pollutants before they can flow any further. To rid the runoff of its less visible elements — the dissolved pollutants and bacteria — it has been diverted to natural grassy or forest areas or manmade structures such as underground infiltrating chambers or rain gardens, where it can be naturally cleansed by the ground or recycled to irrigate a backyard garden.

That cost has generally been inserted into the local tax rate — out of sight, out of mind. But the operation and maintenance expense, such as for cleaning storm drains, both manmade and natural, or street sweeping, are parceled out on a per capita basis, not for how much each individual or business contributes to the pollution that is being fought against by city and state workers.

It does not represent, as some would have it, a new tax. It is merely a re-allocation of what is already in place in a municipal budget to those who put the greatest burden on the existing system, and incur the most cost to the community.

At a time when budgets are in tough shape, but the desire for clean drinking water and a clean environment still rank at the top of the priority list for the general public, the sense that people should only have to pay their fair share for a healthy environment is growing.

"The more you pave, the more you pay" concept is making more and more sense for communities across the United States. Owners of properties or businesses that are replete with impervious surfaces and exacerbate pollution after it rains are being charged for that waterproof ground or building cover. Homes or businesses that minimize their impervious surface area are rewarded with a smaller user fee.

Treating the processing and management of stormwater as a utility with a user fee based on paying your deserved share, just like your monthly water or sewer bill, is being implemented in states such as North Carolina, where a stormwater user fee in towns and districts is the norm, rather than the exception. A number of New

England communities such as Burlington, Vt., and South Portland, Maine, now have stormwater user fees in place.

The campaign for cleaner stormwater has begun but it is not adequately funded. In Rhode Island, Middletown and Westerly have been out front in recognizing the need for funding stormwater management efforts to prevent beach closures and mitigate flooding. With assistance from the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), and with the blessings of their town officials, they are conducting studies to see if a stormwater utility makes sense. In addition to the idea of fairness, civic leaders also are aware that their local environments, featuring beaches and scenic landscapes, are an economic driver.

The DEM, partnering with the Department of Transportation, the University of Rhode Island's Cooperative Extension Stormwater Solutions project and Save The Bay, has recently completed a three-workshop series on stormwater utilities. Topics included learning how to evaluate the full cost of managing stormwater, the pros and cons of a stormwater utility through lessons learned from the trenches, and how to encourage low-impact design and "green infrastructure" that not only save businesses and homeowners unnecessary costs, but also benefits quality of life through a cleaner environment.

A well-received workshop presentation at the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns annual conference Jan. 26 showed municipal officials how an affordable stormwater utility could benefit them even within the strictures of a tight budget, while remaining affordable to local residents.

Is such a project easy? No. Is it fair and equitable? Yes. Does it improve local living conditions and help the community economically? Yes. It doesn't look like a difficult choice.

And the logic isn't too hard, either. The more you pave, the more you pay.

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